**The university ranking game in East Asia: the sensemaking of academic leaders between pressures and fatigue**

**ABSTRACT**

Rankings dominate higher education policy making, although little is known about the experiences of those involved in perpetuating rankings. This paper explores middle level academic leaders’ sensemaking about university rankings and related policies in East Asia. Since university rankings have affected higher education policies and strategies more intensely in East Asia than in other regions of the world, our research aims to trace the process of meaning construction and reconstruction of the middle level academic leaders directly involved with the rankings game. Qualitative data have been drawn from in-depth interviews with key informants across elite institutions in three East Asian countries (Mainland China, South Korean and Japan). Our findings show how even in the well performing countries (Mainland China and South Korea) the “ranking fever” has been replaced by the “ranking fatigue”. There is no running from rankings, but the paradox of not believing in them but engaging with them has created an affective response that is deeper than lack of trust towards the commercial system of ranking: it is a deeply rooted feeling of fatigue. This is leading the discussion on how to find an alternative to rankings and possibly forge a new path forward for East Asian universities, reshaping the geography of higher education in the region.

**KEYWORKS**

University rankings, higher education, East Asia, academic leaders, middle leaders, sensemaking

**INTRODUCTION**

Previous studies have shown how university rankings have affected national higher education policies and benchmarking strategies more intensely in East Asia than in other regions of the world (Li, et al., 2022; Lee, Liu & Wu, 2000). Governments have employed rankings as a policy instrument to measure and monitor the performance of their universities to steer their higher education sector toward a global standard (Lo & Allen, 2023). “Global university rankings are often thought of as games, defined by roles and rules that universities must play in order to confirm their legitimacy and gain visibility as actors in the global academic market” (Yudkevich et al. (2015, p. 411). Much of the literature engages with these aspects of rankings. There is however no research that tries to understand how those academics and managers who are deputed to implement national and institutional policy within their institutions interpret rankings and how it affects their work. What can we find under the cover of strong national drivers to engage in the ranking game? Looking specifically at elite and internationally oriented institutions in the People’s Republic of China[[1]](#footnote-2), Japan, and the Republic of Korea[[2]](#footnote-3), this paper addresses the question: *if rankings are a game everyone must play, how do the players understand the rules, address the challenges, and feel about the game?* In doing so, on a theoretical level, this paper addresses the need for a more subtle and nuanced understanding of how rankings influence institutions from the inside (Locke, 2021), particularly the behaviours and perceptions of individuals, members of governance and management or, as we define them here: middle level academic leaders. Within institutions, these leaders take on actions such as translating, mediating, negotiating, planning, and monitoring (Birollo & Teerikangas, 2022; Stensaker, Falkenberg, & Gronhaug, 2008), therefore they are uniquely placed to reflect on and operate within conflicting logics. In this research, we draw out the ‘sensemaking’ that academic leaders articulate about rankings within their institutional, national and global contexts (Chidobem, 2023; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

Conceptualizing sensemaking as a social process of meaning construction and reconstruction, we have drawn qualitative data from in-depth interviews with key informants across institutions in three East Asian countries. Data were analyzed to: uncover the perceived rules of the ranking games; identify the perceived limits of the game; and define the levels of pressures to “conform and perform” (Gioia & Corley, 2017). This process elicited the sensemaking about the dual role of rankings as guidelines and tools to improve an institution or/and to be used in building international reputation. For individuals, we also uncovered the middle level academic leaders’ affective responses. Our final aim is to trace how the ranking game as an empirical phenomenon is manufactured and how it unfolds in the life of university staff, drawing attention to the social sensemaking and culture of rankings in East Asia. This is perpetuated despite not meeting institutional, national, or international needs and in spite of a ubiquitous sense of fatigue expressed by middle level academic leaders about the game they are forced to play.

**LITERATURE REVIEW: THE GAME EVERYONE PLAYS**

Universities have always been collaborative and competitive (Perkin, 2007). For centuries, the competition has been evaluated by implicit reputation and status without any quantitative data to back up such perceptions. At the beginning of the 21st century[[3]](#footnote-4), commercial rankings systems started to be developed to provide a “numerical assessment of the performance of a program, activity, institution or system of higher education” (Siwinski et. al, 2021, p. 9). Given the increasing complexity of the higher education global environment, all higher education stakeholders have been attracted to the simplified measures that commercial ranking provide to make sense of this complexity (Ball, 2012; Sadlak, 2014).

The widespread availability and accessibility of rankings as well as the marked publicity granted to them have had significant influence on students and student choice (Drewes & Michael, 2006). Studies have repeatedly shown a strong correlation between institutional reputation, rankings and student (both local and international) application behaviour (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1989). While rankings were initially aimed at these external stakeholders (prospective students and their families), the interest in and usage of rankings has progressively broadened to institutions themselves (i.e. for internal auditing and as tools of governance and management) and governments, especially with the regular publication of global university rankings (Johnes, 2018). In a similar vein, rankings have also become the main tool to orient universities’ global partnership and internationalisation strategies. Top-ranked universities mainly collaborate with other highly ranked institutions; low-ranked universities find themselves without the necessary capital to attract partners. In this context of global positional competition, policymakers and university governance actors often use data from rankings to frame and justify decision-making and resource allocation (Kim, 2018). Ultimately, rankings have become so important to all higher education stakeholders that “rankings—both national and international—have not just captured the imagination of higher education but in some ways have captured higher education itself” (Bekhradnia, 2016, p. 3).

Parallel to the rise of ranking systems themselves, a rich and multi-faceted body of transdisciplinary literature has emerged investigating this phenomenon. To date, a significant share of this work has focussed on the massive and reciprocal influence of rankings and global higher education policies and regulations (Marginson, 2006). Authors have explained how rankings serve to reinforce the broader marketization of higher education, enhancing neoliberal policies and ratcheting up the level of competition among institutions at a global level (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Corley & Gioia, 2000). Ranking systems are pushing universities across the globe into becoming strategic corporations, engaged in positional competition to close the gap between their current and preferred rank (Hazelkorn, 2009). A significant body of work takes into consideration the contexts in which the different national higher education systems are embedded, showing how rankings have influenced the policies of specific states (Hazekorn, 2015).

Reference is often made to national governments’ desires to foster “world class” research-intensive universities, an aim so widespread that a “global model” has been formulated for such institutions. Several authors have engaged in an analysis of the various national initiatives used to build such “world class” universities, arguing that they have resulted in the creation of a limited number of institutions in each country that are monopolizing resources, thereby fuelling the vertical stratification of higher education systems (Ishikawa, 2009). Asian universities that have played the catch-up game with their Western counterparts offer a crucial insight into understanding the centrality of university rankings to the world-class conception (Lee, Liu & Wu, 2020; Lo, 2011). From a macro point of view, the level where the bulk of the literature is concentrated, the research suggests not only that there is no running from rankings, but also that universities have relatively little control over the results. In fact, rankings have an intrinsic nature as a zero-sum game (Altbach, 2015; Marginson, 2013). As such, an institution may fall dramatically in a given year due not to underperformance (it might even have performed better than the previous year in relative terms), but merely because competitors have increased their indicator outputs or the systems have changed the weighting scores.

**UNIVERSITY RANKINGS IN EAST ASIA: A REVIEW OF PRIOR RESEARCH AND POLICY ISSUES**

East Asian higher education appears to have been very sensitive to university rankings, even before the rise of commercial rankings (Yonezawa, 2021). In comparing the debates on rankings in Japan and USA in the 1970s, [Ulrich Teichler](https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-94-007-1116-7#author-1-2) concluded that the social relevance of rankings in Japan was much greater than in the USA. This seemed to be related to the fact that professional success was seen as more strongly determined in Japan than in the USA, where the dream of enjoying career advancement “*from the dishwasher to the millionaire*” left hope for later corrections of a mediocre education (Teichler, 1991). More recently, multiple factors have exponentially increased this already marked relevance of university rankings across East Asia. Prior research has underlined that, since the 1990s, most of the national leaders in this region expect rankings to signal a country's socio-economic development in line with the global trends of building a knowledge economy. Against this backdrop, central governments have deliberately used international ranking as part of their globalization strategies by making significant investments in their top universities, with an emphasis on rapidly improving their capacity for producing high-quality research. Rankings proved to be in alignment with an eagerness to transplant norms and standards from the West to achieve world-class status (Lo & Liu, 2021). This eagerness represents a postcolonial perspective according to which the orientation of higher education development has habitually been shaped by an East-West dichotomy (Lo, 2016), and the internationalisation of higher education often interpreted as Westernisation (Deem et al., 2008).

Existing research has analysed these high-stakes catch-up policies pursuing world-class development by contextualising them in the specific countries of East Asia (Lee et al. 2020; Lo 2016; Lo & Hou, 2020; Gao & Zheng, 2020; Byun et al., 2013). In this section, these policies are presented together with the pitfalls that the scholarly debate has underlined. By means of a regional policy lens, it is important to underline how the arms race to rise in university ranking has exacerbated competitiveness among the different countries instead of building a regional cooperation model (Hammond, 2016). In fact, the zero-sum logic of rankings has led governments to act in an exclusivist manner, thus creating geopolitical tensions inside the region. The decline of Japanese universities, which have a well-established academic tradition and were on top of the rankings in the early years of the race, has been frequently presented as a by-product of the rise of neighbouring China and South Korea (Yonezawa, 2021). However, this is – as shall be seen below – too simplistic a conclusion to draw.

China

In the early 1990s, the Chinese government launched the high-profile 211 Project with the explicit goal of moving towards “world standard” higher education (Ngok & Guo, 2008). The project has funnelled substantial funding to 100 selected universities (with a few more added in a later stage) to enhance their research capacity building and increase research and postgraduate supervision. In 1998, the Chinese government targeted an even smaller number of institutions for the 985 Project. These institutions, 39 in total, were established as the domestic elite and became the most recognised institutions internationally (Yang & Welch, 2012; Rhoads, Shi, & Chang, 2014). The first nine of these institutions were organised into a so-called ‘Chinese Ivy League’ dubbed the C9 League (Allen, 2017). Due to these concerted efforts, Chinese universities have seen dramatic changes in research productivity, especially in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields (Zhang, Patton, & Kenney, 2013), and have collectively overtaken most of their competitors in terms of research output metrics, a development that was reflected in outstanding performance in the international rankings. Institutions such as Peking University, Tsinghua University and Zhejiang University have solidified their international reputation as some of the best universities in the world, with elite partners in the West lauding their academics (Yang & Welch, 2012; Rhoads, Shi, & Chang, 2014).

Stepping up the pace of developing elite universities, the Chinese government launched the World-Class 2.0 project in 2015 that has maintained most of the established hierarchies. Several scholars have pointed out that this pursuit of world-class excellence has changed the Chinese national higher education ecosystem: the global dimension of research productivity is now favoured in this sector while the local and national dimensions of faculty work are neglected in some ways (Kim et al., 2018). Moreover, the lack of institutional autonomy and academic freedom alongside issues of academic corruption and intellectual property infringement remain critical challenges for China to overcome. Gao and Zheng (2020) reflect on the difficult and paradoxical position of Chinese academics who are expected to lead research globally while having their research scholarship closely monitored and tightly controlled by a government whose ideology may be different from the ideologies prevailing in international academia. Providing a critical review of the history and impacts of China’s quest to win the ranking game, Mok and Kang state that the next challenge for the country is to “look for ways to position itself as a leader rather than merely conforming to the assessment criteria controlled by the Anglo-Saxon paradigm” (Mok&Kang, 2021, p. 378).

South Korea

Until the middle of 1990s, Korean academia was not significantly involved in the global debate over building world-class universities. National universities had a relatively low standing in the rankings. With continued economic growth and the rapid massification of the higher education system supported by the knowledge economy discourse, however, South Korea eventually entered the rankings game and quickly began to see significant achievements. In the late 1990s, the Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources launched the Brain Korea 21 project (BK21). The vision of BK21, ‘‘stronger with enhanced human capital’’, clearly outlined the two primary objectives of the Korean government: to establish 10 research-oriented universities and to make Korea one of the top ten most advanced countries in the world in terms of knowledge transfer from university to industry. The project budget was used, in various phases, to support graduate students and research infrastructures of a restricted selection of institutions and research groups, mostly in the areas of science and engineering (Seong et al., 2008). The project was successful in boosting the international rank position of top-tier universities, but it has also come under heavy criticism. In fact, this funding focused overwhelmingly on a few institutions and sectors (mostly STEM), thereby encouraging an unbalanced development and Westernisation of the higher education sector (Byun et al., 2013) and driving priorities not fully compatible with institutional quality goals. Notwithstanding these critiques, the South Korean government launched more elite-making projects: the World Class University (WCU) in 2008 and the BK21 PLUS in 2013. The first project had the aim of supporting South Korea networking with international partners: attracting scholars, expanding the English language curriculum to enrol international students, and supporting publications in highly cited indices. The second, BK21 PLUS, refocused on fostering research education and output while moving several universities into the top-200 of global league tables. These governmental efforts have had the desired effect in that a significant number of South Korean universities were indeed positioned in this target range on the most global ranking schemes for more than a decade (Jang et al., 2016), although in the last rounds of rankings their position has become less solid.

Japan

In contrast with institutions in neighbouring China and South Korea, Japan’s top-tier universities have gradually slipped down in the rankings over the past two decades. This surprised both the top tier universities and the government, as high-quality higher education had always been seen as a hallmark of Japan’s education policy. Japanese academics attribute much of this to the language barrier as teaching and research publications are all in Japanese, and out of reach to the wider international academia. Elite-making initiatives were launched by the Japanese government as well, but they were implemented at a slower pace and with less financial investment. These excellence initiatives first took the form of concentrated financial investment to support research, including Twenty-First Century Centres of Excellence (21COE), from 2002 to 2009, and then Global Centres of Excellence (GCOE), from 2007 to 2014 (Yonezawa & Shimmi, 2015). In addition, various types of funding projects have sought to support graduate schools and research institutes in becoming world-class, such as the World Premier International Centre Initiatives (WPI), a more concentrated, long-term (10-year) investment in very few institutions (nine have been selected since 2007) (Yonezawa & Hou, 2014).

The Japanese government later realized the importance of higher education internationalization to the country’s international presence, and thus began the second wave of excellence schemes (including the Global 30 in 2009 and the Top Global University Project in 2014) that all focused on bringing English language teaching to Japanese campuses, including by flying in international academics for short periods of time. By launching the Designated National University Project in 2017, the government has further shifted the focus of its excellence initiatives to the socio-economic development of the nation. This latest project therefore requires its six publicly funded universities to link their research and education with the goal of promoting social change and industrial innovation (Yonezawa, 2019). The main reasons for the relatively poor outcomes of these initiatives include the delay in internationalization. Internationalization is typically measured in global university rankings through indicators such as the percentage of international students and faculty, areas in which Japanese universities are reported particularly “weak” (Yonezawa, 2019). The cutbacks in government research spending are a factor that scholars have frequently cited to explain the lack of research performance (Yonezawa, 2023). Lastly, the universities’ leadership have proven resistant to transformation due to several factors including the traditional values attributed to domestic higher education, the pre-existing national order, and power dynamics within universities (Ishikawa, 2009).

Against the backdrop of macro-scale policies and governmental, we draw on theoretical tools on sensemaking to focus the reaction of middle level academic leaders towards the ranking game. In doing so, we provide a new angle of analysis, a micro-lens, in this scholarly debate.

**THEORETICAL FRAMING**

Neoliberalism has been the dominant theoretical approach in research on global rankings. Global competition is part of the development of higher education (Marginson, 2006), linked with the rise of world-class universities. Rankings offer standards for evaluating and regulating quality in higher education (Hazelkorn, 2018), based on the institutionalisation of market principles in higher education. Rankings have become a dominant tool for:

1. Student choice (consumer information tool);
2. information for international students;
3. partnerships and international collaborations;
4. international marketing (for domestic and international audience); and
5. transnational higher education.

This neoliberal ideology and pro-market competition model stems from Western countries (Hazelkorn, 2008). There is an associated call for world-class universities in Asia but this is linked with development and developmental states (Lo & Allen, 2023). This stems from competition from Asian universities with the West and the ability of global rankings to offer an indicator of the socio-economic development to national leaders. “The prevalence of university rankings and their strong influence over national higher education policy represent an institutionalization of Western hegemony, which leads to an intensification of hierarchical differentiation and stratification at both national and global levels” (Lo & Allen, 2023, p. 211).

There is a post-colonial approach of using rankings as a way to develop higher education and increase national competitiveness. There is some resistance to globalisation, but there is a pervasive argument that developing higher education is seen as a key step for being competitive in a global knowledge economy. But there are questions about the ability of Asian countries to develop Western-modelled ‘world class higher education’ without the foundations of academic freedom as found in the West, or with the approaches of targeting funding at developing a few elite institutions (Altbach, 2016). In the East Asian context, local aspects of academic work are devalued in the pursuit of rankings (Chou, 2014). Research identified the homogenising effect of metrics and English language-based journals (Marginson, 2009) and the isomorphism and devaluing of local culture (Deem et al., 2008). There is concern on how such logics lead to resources being concentrated on rankings-based activities over educational activities (Kim, 2018). Practices such as the payment for publishing culture in China were in direct response to rankings, although these have since been banned in China.

However, there is a noted gap in the literature of the influence of rankings on higher education institutions and their governance and how the ‘logics’ of rankings are internalised by people who work at universities (Locke, 2021). Rankings can be seen as an application of managerialism (Lo & Hou, 2020). Rankings and the focus on metrics such as student satisfaction and graduate employment compound approaches of New Public Management within universities (Carvalho & Santiago, 2010). Research explores the concern about the reaction of ranking changes from key stakeholders—prospective students, employers, potential research partners, funding organisations, government and alumni (Grewal, et al., 2008).

Research in the UK context has shown how within institutions rankings have turned into “powerful tools for monitoring and influencing their organisational behaviour and that of their staff and students” (Locke 2021, p. 82). Locke (2021) used organisational case studies to develop a conceptual framework identifying six main ways rankings are used within institutions:

1. Strategic positioning and decision-making
2. Redefining activities and altering perceptions
3. Evolving responses
4. Affective responses
5. Self-management
6. Degrees of control in resisting, managing, exploiting and ‘gaming’ rankings

He identified processes of internalisation and institutionalisation of power relations within institutions, access to different levels of resources and the ability to resist internal and external pressures. But he also identified the affective, emotional response of those engaged with rankings.

We draw on research from the field of behavioural science, which has been recommended for analysis in higher education research (Cai & Mountford, 2022). To explore the role of middle level academic leaders in response to rankings, we use research on institutional work and embedded agency (Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009). This positions rankings as part of the ‘business’ of institutions and takes the lens that those within institutions play a role in facilitating this. This perspective aims to address concerns that institutions see rankings as something ‘done’ to them, rather than acknowledge their role in the ‘game’. With rankings often described as a ‘game’, we situate this research in the theory of paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011). We see middle level academic leaders as needing to address demands of multiple institutional logics (Ocasio, Thornton & Lounsbury, 2017), balancing academic cultures, governmental pressure, national honour and the commercial rankings industry.

Within institutions, middle level academic leaders take on actions such as translating, mediating, negotiating, planning, and monitoring (Stensaker, Falkenberg & Gronhaug, 2008), influencing the impact of the multiple logics operating within higher education. Middle level academic leaders are uniquely placed to reflect on and operate within conflicting logics. In this research, we draw out the sensemaking that middle level academic leaders articulate about rankings within their institutional and national contexts. Sensemaking has been “conceptualized as a social process of meaning construction and reconstruction through which managers understand, interpret, and create sense for themselves and others of their changing organizational context and surroundings” (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Sensemaking goes beyond how individuals feel, capturing how they construct meaning from ambiguous and uncertain situations, drawing on their social context (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). For example, a situation occurs, individuals organise a framing of it in their minds and view it through their social environment, then take action in relation to this. Thus sensemaking has both cognitive and social elements, which we draw on as both a theoretical concept and a description of how academic leaders respond to rankings. We use this framework to explore the social sensemaking and the culture of rankings in East Asia, which is perpetuated despite not meeting institutional, national, and international needs. We draw out the processes of sensemaking by middle level academic leaders in navigating the tensions of the demands of multiple institutional logics. We highlight the importance of agency, where institutions provide the environment for middle level academic leaders to operate in but note that middle level academic leaders also influence their environment.

**METHODOLOGY[[4]](#footnote-5)**

This research has employed a qualitative methodology, informed by a phenomenological approach, to achieve a nuanced and substantive understanding of East Asian university middle level academic leaders’ sensemaking about rankings and related policies. Given the research approach adopted, we deemed it important to start our inquiry with the institutions most actively involved in the rankings game. The targeted universities self-describe as globally ambitious, striving to build international partnerships and internationalisation at home by hiring foreign staff and recruiting large foreign student populations. They are ranked highly in the domestic rankings. Despite the limitations of the sampling, the findings from this study can offer lessons and insights regarding the elite component of East Asian higher education.

Drawing on Locke’s (2021) research, we focus on those who play key roles of managing the external and internal pressures of rankings. We use the term ‘middle level academic leaders’ to describe those who manage rankings within organisations. Such individuals may have academic, managerial or professional roles and they play an essential role in brokering (Kallenberg, 2020) and negotiating rankings within institutions. Broadly, the role of middle level academic leaders in organisations is often seen as fluid and undefined (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). They often have senior positions, yet do not have much power and remain caught between institutional policies and the academics who are expected to deliver on the policy priorities – hence their position in the middle, sandwiched between often incompatible positions above and below. This role is under-researched in the higher education literature, as well as in the context of rankings (Locke, 2021).

In the context of this research, we identified middle level academic leaders as those that had a responsibility for rankings within their institutions, and were responding to, but not in charge of, high-level institutional decision-making (often reserved to Presidents). Thus, our population of participants varied in role, including: Head of Department, (former) Vice President for International Relations, Dean of School, senior professors and senior administrative staff. Although some roles were in central offices, participants were positioned as ‘in the middle’ in relation to brokering roles within their institutions. Furthermore, in-line with Asian institutions more widely, no participants had training or development to support them in these roles (Azman et al., 2023).

To ensure a level of trust between the research team and the participants, the sample of interviewees was gathered through networks and referrals, a common practice in qualitative educational research of this nature (McMillan, 2012). In-depth interviews were carried out with 11 key informants across different institutions in Mainland China (4)[[5]](#footnote-6), South Korea (3)[[6]](#footnote-7) and Japan (4)[[7]](#footnote-8), conducted between November 2022 and January 2023. Considering the limitations on travel still in place due to Covid 19, most of the interviews were carried out via Zoom while a limited number took place in person[[8]](#footnote-9). Given the focus of the study, the participants were selected from among individuals who held middle management governance positions in their institutions (from Department Heads to Vice Rectors) and were in a mid to late phrase of their career. Different academic backgrounds were represented, and as is often the case with regard to hierarchical positions in East Asian universities, all participants were male, but is a limitation of the study. All of the participants had a good command of English, therefore the use of a translator was deemed unnecessary. Anonymity has been ensured for both individuals and institutions by not naming individuals, specific roles or specific institutions. This was a key criteria for ensuring participation, due to the reputational risks surrounding rankings.

Three methodological and analytical challenges surfaced: 1) individual sensitivities about participating in the research; 2) the complexity of mapping the drivers and pressures at different levels; and 3) the complexity of comparing approaches across countries. First, there is widespread sensitivity and hesitation about participating in research on rankings. It is not possible for middle level academic leaders to publicly express an opinion about rankings not aligned with official institutional positions without fearing repercussions or a sense of shame. Only the assurance of anonymity (for both individuals and institutions) could offer us the possibility to delve “beneath the surface” of institutional narratives to reveal the thought processes of individuals. A second analytical challenge revolved around the difficulty of disentangling or disaggregating the various aspects of local, national, and global narratives and pressures to engage with rankings. During the interviews, ample time was dedicated to discussing the issues related to ranking to focus on the interplay of pressures and demands. Lastly, at the beginning of our research, we did not assume which direction the intra-comparison between the selected countries could take (convergent or divergent). Following analysis, the data collected mostly showed a similar attitude of the middle level academic leaders of the three different countries towards the ranking game, thus we aggregated the findings in a way that these similarities are presented in a coherent way. Against this backdrop, further studies can move in the direction of exploring more nuanced attitudes towards rankings considering a wider range of institutions (not only the elite sector we have selected) in the three countries.

**FINDINGS**

Which game? Which rules?

Most of the participants describe rankings as not one activity, but multiple games unfolding. The most common is the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings scheme. While QS is not the longest-running continuous ranking, it has the longest-running discipline or subject ranking, since 2011. Participants have proven to have a better knowledge of this ranking that breaks down larger universities in specific departments that have a more direct connection with the individual academic work. The other rankings systems mentioned were the Times Higher Education (THE) and the US News & World Report (US News). Japanese and South Korean respondents also referred to the national rankings that were not considered by the Chinese respondents. Interestingly, no participants mentioned the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), founded by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University. In his studies, Ryan M. Allen (2017) noted that ARWU might be somewhat discounted by actors in the Chinese system. Probably, this extended to the broader East Asian context.

It is widely felt that rankings (especially the international ones) are games governed by opaque rules, characterized by a general lack of transparency and using unreliable methodology to aggregate and analyse the data. One major criticism of the rankings concerns the use of reputational indicators. QS, THE, and US News include a peer evaluation metric accounting up to half of the ranking score. Ranking companies send out peer assessment surveys across the world to various stakeholders in the sector using emails provided by the different institutions.

*Kind of ceremonially we (professors) receive messages once a year from the headquarters saying: this is the season of ranking evaluation so ask your global international friends and remind them they will receive a questionnaire to fill in. […] Not only once, we get this notification from multiple units and people: headquarters, deans, colleagues, department chairs. We receive multiple pressures and gentle reminders that we have to do our best to contribute to this year’s rankings.* (K1).

This process is described as an annual ceremony that it is felt very transactional, creating disillusionment. Linking with Locke’s affective response, the sensemaking by participants also involved self-management. Every participant is aware of this process but few of them declare that they refuse to participant in it:

*I* *did get some emails for filling out some tables to rank the universities. But I don’t follow up on them. I think it is not my job to answer them. I have no time, so I just leave the e-mails unanswered. I don’t answer them*. (C2).

For the indicators that are not reputationally-based, the participants do not appear very informed: “*I’m very confused about the mechanism*” (C2). There is knowledge that research publications and international partnerships are weighted in most of the rankings, but there is little knowledge about the specific indicators and actions that can be taken to influence them. Lastly, different participants report scandals (forged data) and rumours of lack of transparency in a process that is led by commercial companies and that can be subject to client-based logics*: “Most of the universities presidents in South Korean especially the big players, they have this annual I would say ‘pilgrimage to London’ to meet the director in charge of QS rankings, so they kind of religiously have this pilgrimage to meet him” ( K1).* Even our Japanese respondents reminded us that South Korean Vice-Presidents would undertake such trips whereas Japanese Vice-Presidents would not.

Why we cannot not play

Participants can identify financial and non-financial benefits linked to having a good performance in rankings, but they are not a positive motivational factor. The negative consequences perceived by not playing the game makes it mandatory to engage. Participants assume that the reaction of a few stakeholders to a sudden decrease in their ranking will have an impact on their reputation, brand and ultimately attractiveness. Who are these stakeholders? Firstly, as could be expected considering the policies mentioned in previous sections, there are national governments: *“So, this is a compulsory outcome included in the Central Government strategy linking economic development and the universities. The Central Government strategy values the rankings a lot*”. (C3) “*However, external pressures are enormous, because media coverage mixed with the government officials talk so much about this because it is so easy to judge universities on the basis of those numbers*”. (J2) Governments do give incentives for playing the game but they come at a cost:

*In Japan, those government funded money grants are sometimes called “poisonously sweet”. They are poisonous. You take one bite and then another and it feels all right, but it's a poisonous sweet inside. And then once you bite and eat and you put it all in your stomach, you have kind of been manipulated, you have to be a slave of the government said. This way or that way, you have to do that way. You have to accept so many eyes watching us and criteria*. (J2)

Secondly, there are pressures from donors and alumni: *“Alumni, who are ordinary people, do not know anything about academia or these deep philosophical debates, and who don't know anything about these issues, they greatly appreciate elevated rankings in this game so that's another pressure from outside*” (K1). Thirdly, there are pressures from other universities, especially international partners:

*When we approach potential partners like universities abroad, very often their first or second question is “What is your rank?”. So, even if I would often say that those rankings have nothing to do with internationalisation, nothing to do with international education, however, somehow in East Asia, particularly Japan, Korea, Taiwan, very often we discuss those international rankings as part of internationalisation. For me, it's nothing to do with internationalisation and international education. But yes, for instance, prospect international students, they refer to the rankings when they choose their destination where to study abroad, I understand*. (J2)

This last quote shows a paradox: even universities that are very disillusioned about rankings use them for specific strategic purposes. As we explore later, rankings perpetuate themselves even if the players are very aware of their limits. This shows how middle level academic leaders redefine their activities (Locke, 2021), such as international partnerships, based on rankings they know to be flawed.

Lastly, some participants mentioned internal institutional pressures: *“For the leadership – managers, board members, vice president, president...rankings are important...the University President asked me: “How many internationally recognized papers, or highly citated papers do we need at minimum?”* Notably, no participants mentioned students and parents as points of pressure. As already mentioned, scholarship tends to underline a direct correlation between institutional reputation, rankings and student application behaviour (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1989). At the same time, middle level academic leaders at East Asian elite universities seem to be aware that their students are enrolling due to the national reputation of the universities. Rankings might be important to attract international students, but domestically reputation matters more.

The perceived limits of the game

Participants referred frequently to points about rankings mentioned in the scholarly literature, including: STEM bias; the focus on a Western model of education; and the research bias. *“The rankings not only divert attention towards research. But we have evidence...that there is nothing good for the quality of teachers, there's nothing good for the student experience*” (C4). However, during our interviews, the most discussed limitation is the fact that the rankings do not reflect the societal challenges that universities are called to face. Therefore, they are taking universities and academics away from having a positive impact on society. As one participant noted:

*“I think there is this fundamental reflection going on the ranking is that we have tried so much to do better according to current ranking game but it does not increase our capacity to deal with first mega level social change and global change, like what the university should do in terms of education and research. We have doubts on the professors publishing in those Index Journals, because it doesn't improve at all our value as university to be relevant in terms of our society and it doesn't necessarily increase our capability to deal with the so called fourth industrial revolution and train our students better. Today, students have difficulties in finding jobs, even good universities' graduates. And in this situation, what is the gain about having this whole ranking game which is not very instrumental about making university better?”* (K1).

Chinese participants argue very strongly about having their own national agenda for social change that takes precedence over rankings: “*In recent times, the Chinese universities are paying more and more attention to the country’s problems. We are interested in answering the country's own questions. How to push Chinese modernization? And the development and so on?*” (C3).

Rather than refining rankings, some participants were more radical and imagined exiting the game. “*I would have thought that the pandemic would have got rid of the rankings. But it doesn't seem to. The issue is that there's little alternative information that people, the public can use”.* (C4) The alternative is not there yet, but as a participant who has played this game in the last twenty years puts it: *“It is a luxury to be able to discuss about how to get out of the ranking game and have an alternative and basically, we don't have an alternative yet, so it's risky for a very prestigious university to talk about getting out of this familiar game”*. (K1)

Not for institutional strategy, but for international sensemaking

All the participants clearly expressed arguments against the use of the rankings for institutional strategic positioning and decision-making or for redefining activities and altering self-perceptions of the institutions. “*Rankings should not become a powerful tool to tell the university what to do. Each university has its own strong areas, but if to meet the benchmark of the ranking, we change the university, we will lose the direction*.” (C3)This shows the boundaries of the internalisation of rankings noted by Locke (2021), with elite institutions able to retain agency over their strategic decision making.

Playing the game is mandatory, but the middle level academic leaders highlight how rankings are not part of their institutional strategy or even part of how they view their institutions, especially if the domestic landscape is considered: “*There is a mismatch and there is a very big gap between our own institutional perception, the value of our university in our country, and what comes out from the rankings*.” (C2) This was particularly the case in Japan, where the top state universities are known to be quite disdainful of the rankings as they are so hard for students to get into. “*As I said, I feel these rankings are screwed and distorting the nature of international universities. However, our potential partners […] often ask us our ranking. So, we have to deal with then. Even if we don't like it. So that's our strategy.”* (J3)

There is no connection between how institutions are performing and the scores that appear in the rankings. Even the best-performing universities cannot vouch for the validity of the ranking when it comes to their own strategic sensemaking. However, in the international context, rankings are seen as useful. “*I think actually the rankings are important and effective for universities abroad. Rankings are effective for the Chinese people that need to select which university to study abroad. Because in this case, they don’t have any other information to depend on. They have only the international rankings to consider for having information*” (C2). This draws out the paradox of not valuing or trusting rankings in an internal institutional context but still relying on them in an international context.

**DISCUSSION**

Analysing our findings through the lens of the six points of Locke’s (2021) conceptual framework, we can highlight several considerations regarding what we have defined as the sensemaking of middle level academic leaders, that is, how they perceive, react to and mediate the conflict logics of the game. In the next section, we leverage these considerations to look ahead and advance a series of policy recommendations and possible new avenues for research. As mentioned earlier, in the research design phase we did not have pre-existing assumptions about what direction the intra-comparison between the selected countries might take, but in the end our data showed a similar attitude among the three countries.

As mentioned in the previous sections, the bulk of the existing scholarship has criticized university rankings in terms of what they measure, how they do it, and also whether what they are measuring is actually relevant for improving the quality of provision and student outcomes. Our participants remarked on this criticism, stressing the lack of transparency and biased, opaque methodologies. They often also described feeling that they do not have a full understanding of the specific indicators used and actions that can be taken to influence rankings. Considering the above-mentioned national policies on ranking in East Asia, this can be seen as a by-product of the fact that governments take the lead in this game, leaving universities adrift and without properly actionable information. When it comes to making institutional decisions about strategic goals using ranking data, our sample of elite East Asian universities remark that "clever" universities have realised that adopting rankings as an integral and explicit part of their institutional strategy is unlikely to result in success. Being responsive to rankings must not mean being driven by them or being seen to be driven by them. Rankings are not linked to internal institutional sensemaking (a similar consideration was also made in relation to the UK context by Locke 2021). At the same time, they are both seen as important for international positioning and used for international positioning, and thus constitute a key aspect of external sensemaking. This ability to retain internal agency may be part of the paradox of institutions’ elite status—by choosing not to run themselves according to rankings, institutions were able to instead direct their efforts at the aspects that actually do lead to success in the rankings. Rankings thus provide a map for the sensemaking of the higher education geography.

Middle level academics appear to be sensitive to the fact that rankings do not reflect the societal challenges universities are called on to face. The marked emphasis on this specific limitation of rankings could have to do with the timing of our study, which took place soon after the COVID 19 pandemic, and indeed this event was mentioned by all the participants. These considerations led participants to discuss possible connections between rankings and the universities’ contributions to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). These goals are already being utilised by most of the universities in our sample to formulate their strategies, because they are seen as markers of policy change. Participants are aware of the existence of ranking systems (i.e. the European U-Multirank and Universitas Indonesia Greenmetric) that measure the efforts made by universities worldwide to champion sustainability or foster relations with wider society. At the same time, participants felt that these indicators should be added to the framework of the common rankings systems: if universities are asked to evolve so as to respond to the current polycrisis, middle level academic leaders expect rankings systems to also undergo transformation to fit current societal needs. This suggests evolving responses to rankings in their sensemaking, with middle level academic leaders thinking strategically about how rankings could be used to further that they see as the mission of higher education (Locke, 2021).

Notwithstanding the clear limitations of the rankings game as identified by our respondents, they perceive that playing the rankings game is mandatory due to various sets of pressures. Rankings somehow perpetuate themselves even if the players are highly aware of their limits. In fact, performing in the rankings game (even is only strategically) gives a sense of security to middle level academic leaders, whereas not performing can put those occupying management positions at risk. Our findings show that middle level academic leaders in elite East Asia universities feel a distinct pressure to “conform and perform” in the rankings game. In line with other studies, we show that rankings compel universities to perform according to the particular concept of performance they embody (Gioia & Corley, 2017) because institutions assume that not performing in the game will lead stakeholders to stop providing the institutions with financial and non-financial support and benefits. At the same time, our findings underline that middle level academic leaders react by shaping their own selective sensemaking through strategic positioning, redefining activities, and self-management. However, the impact of rankings was not perceived as broadly among these actors as the literature suggests. Middle level academic leaders felt pressured to perform by governments, donors, and alumni, but not by prospective students and their families.

Navigating the tension-filled field between the demands of ranking logics and what is perceived as the greater good of the institution and society comes at a cost. Our data shows that, even in well- performing countries (Mainland China and South Korea), “ranking fever” has been replaced by “ranking fatigue”. Even the winners are tired. There is no running from rankings, but the paradox of engaging with them even while not believing in them has created an affective response that is deeper than a lack of trust towards the commercial system of rankings: it is a deeply rooted feeling of fatigue. This sense of fatigue is leading the discussion about how to find an alternative to rankings. If there is room for new “sensemaking” about rankings, is there also room to act in other ways? For the past two decades, policies in Asia have been explicit in their goal of catching up to the West, and these elite-making policies throughout the region have proved successful—as measured by the rankings game. Now, especially for Chinese universities, there is a sense of being able to delineate their own path forward and reshape the geography of higher education. Caught between pressures and a sense of fatigue, middle level academic leaders have a clear understanding of the limitations of the game they are playing and are calling for the rules of this game to be reformulated. Ranking companies, governments, and institutions should facilitate a trans-national dialogue that can further the debate on how to make rankings more effective in supporting university engagement with contemporary challenges, as petitioned by middle level academic leaders. To this end, we turn now to outlining some policy recommendations.

**CONCLUSION**

Despite rampant criticism, it is unlikely that the university ranking game will disappear completely. Considering the ubiquitous sense of fatigue felt by middle-level academics at elite East Asian institutions as underlined by this study, it appears important to draw out some considerations about how to move forward. One of the key shifts requested by middle-level academics at elite universities is the shift from competition to collaboration. Speaking with a more collective voice could certainly help middle-level academic leaders in ‘resisting, managing and exploiting’ rankings across East Asian higher education, as so much of the game as it is currently played is about competing locally. There is a need for platforms that would be able to broadcast and empower more of a collective community for these actors trapped in ‘rankings fatigue’. It would also be helpful for more middle-level academics to appreciate that this is not an individual problem, but rather a systemic issue felt across East Asian higher education and that, in this respect, the rankings game is one in which all participants, including the purported winners, actually lose. Moreover, this collective reflection could support what appears to represent a possible new era for Asian universities in which, instead of trying to ‘catch up’ to Western institutions (in the numbers game, they have already caught up), they can chart their own path.

Government actors and institutional upper echelons tend to be guided by the quantitative approach characterising the rankings game, an approach that demands solid numbers as outcomes. Middle-level academic leaders, in contrast, tend to think strategically about how rankings could be used to further their institutional missions. For this reason, they would like to see more priority granted to the way universities address national development than to international competition and jockeying for position. This might include better alignment between ranking criteria and the challenges of the contemporary world, including a focus on sustainability, environmental consciousness, and the third mission. Middle-level academic leaders also have a clear understanding of the areas and targets where rankings have lost their impact. Given that rankings may have less impact on prospective students and families, are there targeted ways to influence governments, donors, and alumni so as to begin to untangle the knot in which rankings have ensnared higher education institutions? Taking stock of the results of this study and considering these open questions, future scholarly research can better frame the mismatch between the sensemaking of academic leaders and the national policies being pursued in each specific country. A more nuanced understanding of this mismatch would help foster the kind of collective and collaborative reflection that can pave the way for a more sustainable future for the middle-level academics asked to manage the rankings game.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

No financial or non-financial interests related the study.

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1. We use the abbreviated version “China” when referring to the State, “Mainland China” when referring to our data since our research focused specifically on Universities in Mainland China. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. We use the abbreviated version “South Korea” when referring to the State and the sample of the Universities selected for this research. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For a comprehensive critical history of university rankings see Wilbers & Brankovic, 2023 and Hazelkorn, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The research was granted full ethical approval by (full data on the later stage due to authors's anonimity conflict). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Interviews with Chinese participants are indicated as C1, C2, C3, C4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Interviews with South Korean participants are indicated as K1, K2, K3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Interviews with Japanese participants are indicated as J1, J2, J3, J4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. As proved by several studies (Olife et al., 2021; Gray et al., 2020), we believe that adapting to a virtual platform for data collection had more benefits than limitations. Benefits included the possibility to carry out this study in countries where COVID-19 restrictions were still present and the added comfort for the participants to answer our questions in the privacy of their own houses. At the same time, in-person interviews allowed building a personal connection allowing the researchers and the participants to discuss university ranking also in informal ways after the interviews. These more informal conversations have sparked ideas for future avenues of research and policy recommendations included in the last section of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)